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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE; NEA/IPA FOR
WILLIAMS/SHAMPAINE/STEINGER; NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WATERS;
TREASURY FOR SZUBIN/LOEFFLER/NUGENT/HIRSON

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SUBJECT: CODEL SPECTER MEETS WITH PALESTINIAN POLITICAL
LEADERS

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. During their December 28 meetings with Senator Specter, PLC members Salam Fayyad, Hanan Ashrawi and Sa,eb Erekat emphasized (1) the reconstruction of PA security forces, (2) reform within Fatah, and (3) renewed efforts in a rapid, viable negotiating process. Erekat praised PA President Mahmoud Abbas, (Abu Mazen) December 23 meeting with Israeli PM Olmert as testimony to Abu Mazen,s leadership and vision, describing it as a "giant step" toward renewed negotiations for a permanent status agreement. End summary.

Salam Fayyad

12. (C) PLC member Salam Fayyad emphasized to Senator Specter the vital need to rebuild PA security forces (PASF). He said rebuilding the PASF is the key goal now, regardless of whether Abu Mazen pursues early elections, and said the current plan will significantly reduce the size of the security forces, but ensure that they are better trained and equipped and more professional.

13. (C) Fayyad said the election of Hamas poses an internal, political problem for the PA, quite apart from the restrictions the international community has imposed. He said there is a fundamental contradiction between Hamas, which rejects previous PLO commitments, and with President Abbas who is also the head of the PLO. Saying, "we're in a bind," Fayyad proposed that the way out is a political program on the basis of the platform on which Abu Mazen was elected and the foundation on which the PA was established in 1994 (i.e. based on Israeli-Palestinian agreements). On early elections, Fayyad said Hamas is losing ground. Having run on a platform of change and reform, Hamas has disappointed the electorate. However, Fayyad said Fatah is not gaining the ground lost by Hamas. He said a Fatah loss in early elections cannot be ruled out.

Hanan Ashrawi

14. (C) PLC Third Way member Hanan Ashrawi told Senator Specter that the Israeli government is using Hamas as an excuse to avoid negotiations toward a permanent status agreement - "just as they had done with Arafat." She stressed the current need for a "rapid and viable" political process with U.S. support.

15. (C) Ashrawi stated that Fatah had not learned from its

mistakes and infighting continues to hamper its ability to attract voters, saying Fatah is "no longer able to capture the imagination of the people." She said that Hamas is more confident than ever of its hold on power and that its members receive money and support from Iran and some Arab countries. She opined that the international boycott against the Hamas-led government has strengthened Hamas, position in power and led to the collapse of PA institutions.

¶16. (C) Senator Specter asked Ashrawi about Syria's ability to contribute to an Israeli-Palestinian permanent status agreement. She replied by stating that Syria holds the "Hamas and Hizballah cards," but its real interest is its control of Lebanon. She said that Iran now "owns the Palestinian cause," and will use it to expand political influence and encourage direct engagement with Iran.

Sa,eb Erekat

¶17. (C) PLO Chief Negotiator Sa,eb Erekat described the December 23 Abu Mazen-Israeli PM Olmert meeting as a "giant step" toward renewing negotiations on a permanent status agreement. He emphasized the leadership Abu Mazen demonstrated in meeting with Olmert at a height of hostilities, saying that for Abu Mazen "to exchange kisses on the cheek with Olmert during the current mess is true leadership!" He added that the many "U.S. allies" among Abu Mazen's advisors had advised against the meeting. He reiterated the necessity for Fatah to reform itself and create an alternative to Hamas for the Palestinian public. He said that the reconstruction of the PA security forces needs to happen to bring the rule of law to the territories. Erekat said that Abu Mazen must call early elections,

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regardless of Hamas, objections, in order to end the current crisis.

¶18. (C) In response to the Senator's questions about the state of Syrian and Iranian influence in the territories, Erekat spoke of the rise of "Persian nationalism" in Iran, saying that the "Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas relationship" is causing chaos throughout the region and staining the reputation of Islam throughout the world.

¶19. (U) CODEL Specter did not have the opportunity to clear on this cable.

WALLES